

What Makes a Flight Surgeon? The Pre-World War I Historical Perspective

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Flight surgeons generally consider World War I the beginning of our specialty, but military doctors were assigned to American aviation units before the war. The story of these early doctors can help to define what a flight surgeon is.

Does a flight surgeon have to be a physician?

Pioneer military pilot Benjamin D. Foulois sometimes told people that he was the first American flight surgeon, even though he had no medical training.¹ No doctor had been assigned to his small detachment at San Antonio. So when headquarters requested aeromedical regulations in 1911, he drew them up as the commander of the detachment. When it became clear 2 years later that most aviation fatalities arose from head injuries or drowning, he mandated that U.S. Army pilots wear helmets and life preservers.⁷ Foulois' tales of having been a flight surgeon were more bar talk than reality. Most flight surgeons today would not consider Foulois one of their number because he was not a doctor.

How much involvement does a flight surgeon need with aviation?

Dr. H. Wellington Jones (1878 to 1977) performed an emergency appendectomy on Lieutenant Foulois and practiced medicine on many other pilots.² Dr. Jones deployed to the Philippines, Mexico, and commanded Tripler Army Medical Center.⁹ But he was not specifically assigned to aviation units and, thus, most aerospace medicine specialists would not consider him a flight surgeon.

Does a flight surgeon have to fly?

Antebellum flying units in the United States had medical officers assigned. These doctors had no specific training in aviation medicine, but they cared primarily for aircrew. For example, Dr. Adna G. Wilde (1885-1977) was assigned to the Signal Corps Aviation School at North Island, San Diego. Dr. Wilde deployed to the Mexican border with his squadron in 1914, where his duties included inspecting prostitutes for sexually transmitted diseases in order to protect the health of his pilots.^{5,12}

When Pancho Villa attacked Columbus, NM, in March 1916, President Wilson ordered a division of troops across the border to apprehend him. The First Aero Squadron accompanied the so-called Mexican Punitive Expedition to conduct reconnaissance missions and to carry dispatches between commanders. First Lieutenant S.S. Warren served the squadron as medical officer and an enlisted hospital corpsman assisted him. Drs. Wilde and Warren were assigned to aviation units and both flew occasionally as passengers. However, they were not rated aircrew and they did not draw flight pay. Were these doctors flight surgeons? Some flight surgeons might say yes and others might say no.^{6,8}

Does a flight surgeon require specific training?

In the winter of 1916-1917 National Guard First Lieutenant Ralph P. Greene served as surgeon to the 3rd Aero Squadron in Texas. Major Benjamin Foulois was serving as Aviation Officer of the Southern Department and he arranged for Dr. Greene to participate in flights under military orders, which specifically stated that his purpose was to "perform medical observations of human beings while participating in flight."^{3,4,10}

First Lieutenant William R. Ream obtained permission from the Surgeon General of the U.S. Army to participate in flying as part of his duties at the Signal Corps Aviation School in 1916. Two years later Major Ream was killed in an aircraft crash in Illinois. Rain had blinded the pilot after his aircraft stalled on landing. Ream's body was recovered in a corn field.¹¹ Neither Dr. Greene nor Dr. Ream received specific training in aviation medicine, but both physicians showed an avid interest in the field and flew regularly under orders while specifically assigned to care for military aircrew. Thus they met most of our current criteria for defining flight surgeons, even before the United States joined the Great War effort in April 1917. Many of today's flight surgeons would consider them pioneer flight surgeons...even if they lacked wings and call signs.

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